

Developing Appropriate Materials: The Vietnam Project

By Ursula Nixon

Since 1985, a United Nations Development Program project has enabled a group of Vietnamese EFL teachers to study each year at the University of Canberra. Though this UNDP program has recently ended, international aid still brings Vietnamese teachers to Australia. These scholarship holders study in the TESOL Centre within the Faculty of Education. As part of the graduate program in TESOL, students have the opportunity to design a kit of materials for use in their own teaching situation back home in Vietnam. They see this as important, since much of the commercially available material is of limited relevance in a country which has yet to experience automatic tellers and multi-channel TV. Of course, it can be argued that topics such as these—so commonly treated in EFL coursebooks—open up the world to the student; but it is difficult to see any real benefit when teachers who have neither experience with microwave ovens (to take another example) nor access to glossy advertising literature about them, face the daunting task of explaining these artifacts to their students.

Preparation

The groundwork for the development of teaching materials is done during the first semester. Students are encouraged to think about needs and situational analysis, so that the materials they design will be relevant both to their own pupils and to the teaching environment in Vietnam. For many Diploma students the concept of needs analysis is like a light on the road to Damascus as they consider a framework for analysis, drawing principally on Munby (1978), McDonough (1984), Hutchinson and Waters (1987), and Nunan (1988). They are able to try out their checklists with groups of language learning students on campus who come from Vietnam and are similar to their students at home. This is not a perfect solution but does provide a reasonable approximation of learning needs for the Diploma students to work with.

With needs identified, students then think about objectives. The process used in familiarizing students with a statement of objectives is to move from a practical task to stating objectives for the completed exercise. For example, students are given sets of colored shapes such as a black rectangle, a green square, a small red triangle, a yellow circle, and so forth. Students work in pairs, sitting back to back and with each individual having a set of colored shapes. Partner A instructs partner B to make a pattern or picture with the shapes and at the same time builds the required pattern. Then the partners compare their results and are either delighted at their accuracy in giving instructions and asking check questions or collapse in laughter at the disparate patterns. From this experience, the students move into groups to frame objectives for the work they have just done. This activity also serves to underline the point that a statement of objectives is not necessarily where the design of teaching materials begins. Equally, it is possible to take content or method or classroom feedback, as a starting point.

A third component in preparation that is carried out in the first semester is the evaluation of commercially available materials, looking particularly at how the content is structured and at the approaches taken in teaching it. Checklists such as those in Harmer (1991) or the criteria suggested by Sheldon (1988:4) are used at this stage. The Diploma students are critical of many of the materials surveyed, for reasons such as reliance on technology (even a cassette player may not be available in the Vietnamese classroom) steepness of progression and cultural bias. Nevertheless, the survey of materials is valued for the variety of techniques and activities which emerge.

Collection of Resources

By the end of the semester, most of the trainees have formed small design teams of two to four people. Occasionally a student will have to work alone because of having a very specific work situation, but usually it is possible for students to form groups according to the type of teaching they are responsible for at home. The design is often skills-based as the teachers from Vietnam usually have responsibility for teaching listening or teaching reading rather than teaching through integrated macro-skills. This is the context in which they must work and it is respected, though less compartmentalized ways of teaching EFL are discussed and demonstrated. During the midsemester break, students have the opportunity to collect the raw material from which they will develop their kits of teaching materials. They do so assiduously, visiting exhibitions, business centres, hospitals, libraries, and museums to collect samples of spoken and written text.

Design Frameworks

At the beginning of the second semester, the trainees face what they find especially difficult and time-consuming, that is, selecting a framework for the design of their materials. Two frames are suggested as a starting point. The first is the "focus wheel" guide to planning units of work, adapted from the Australian Language Levels (ALL) Guidelines (Scarino et al, 1988). See Figure 1 below.

The second suggested framework is that developed in the late 1970s for the Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP) in Australia. It offers a clear matrix for planning units of work and is shown in Figure 2 below.

What happens is that as a result of their study of the two planning models and their evaluation of commercially produced EFL materials, the design teams adapt a framework that suits their own purposes. One which combines elements from both the ALL and AMEP models appears in Figure 3 below.

The unit is run on consultative lines. Design teams meet the lecturer twice weekly to discuss and edit the materials being designed and to consider what may need to be condensed, clarified, or expanded. There is also an opportunity to peer-teach segments of the materials. The printed components of the kits are word-processed, and binding and laminating facilities available for student use in the Faculty of Education ensure an attractive and professional finished product.

The variety of materials produced is some indication of the enormous ELT needs in Vietnam. These include English for doctors, Business English, English for tourism, to name only the more salient. Since 1986, when I began to teach the unit in materials for language teaching, the kits produced have fallen into three broad categories, namely, ESP, skills-based English, and English as communication. The last represents a move away from the more traditional grammar-based approach often used in Vietnam. The ESP titles included: *Restaurant English*, *Commercial Correspondence*, *English for Physics*, *Reading Medical Material*, *English for Receptionists*, and *Foreign Trade English*.

The skills-based kits almost without exception focus on listening and speaking with titles such as *Learning to Listen* and *English through Listening*. The kits which aim at developing communicative use of English included: *Communication in Context*, *Communicating in English*, and *Communicating about Australia*. In all, fifty-one kits of material have been taken home to Vietnam since 1986. This represents work by 126 Diploma students from the major centres of Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh city, and Hue.

Feedback

It is all very well to produce kits of language teaching materials, but fruitless if these materials do not in fact get used in the home context. There are indications, however, that the kits are put to use. First, a survey of Vietnamese alumni from the TESOL Centre was carried out in 1989. Students were asked about the extent to which the materials they had designed were in use. Eighty-six percent of the respondents said that their kits were used and of these, 52% indicated that the materials were used to some extent and 34% to a great extent. These figures are reassuring given the degree of control over what is taught—a centralized syllabus being common in Vietnam. Perhaps more convincing was a personal experience. On arriving in Hanoi for a teacher development workshop in 1988, I was recognized by total strangers—the hotel staff who "knew" me from the tape and visual materials produced as part of *Restaurant English*.

Conclusion

The design of teaching materials is a complex task. In the unit described, the design process is broken down into stages, and the approach taken is to work from a practical task back to the theoretical basis and its implications. Feedback from student evaluations suggests that this makes the design process both more comprehensible and easier to manage. It is also important that students work in design teams whenever possible, rather than as individuals. This not only shares the load and generally leads to production of a more substantial kit, it fosters the skills of working cooperatively rather than competitively. As has been indicated, the needs for materials in Vietnam are enormous. The work produced by the TESOL Diploma students has gone some way to meeting those needs.

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SOCIAL CONTACTS				
Talking about Occupations and Leisure Activities				
MACRO SKILLS	SPECIFIC FUNCTION	SYNTAX		LEXIS
Speaking	Asking for information - occupations and	What + do/does + NP + do (+ adv.T)		interesting
and	leisure	What do you do?		enjoyable
Listening	activities	What do you do on weekends?	work (v)	fun
			play	very
		Do/Does + NP + Vinf + NP/adv	read	really

Asking for information - duration of an activity or occupation	Do you work every day?	study	much
	Do you play any sport?	make	a lot
		cook	a little
	How long + has/have + NP + been + NP/adj./adv	live	a bit
	How long have they been there?	travel	pretty
	How long have you been a painter?	stay	rather
		like	
	How long + has/have + NP + been + Ving + NP/ adv	enjoy	
	How long have you been working night shift?	practise	
	When + did + NP +Vinf (+ NP/adv.)		
Asking for opinions- occupations and leisure activities	When did he start the job?	train (v)	
	When did you join?	belong	
		pay	day
	Is + NP (+ adv.D) + adj.	boss	afternoon
	Is it very interesting?	work	night
		job	shift
	What + is/are + NP + like	hour	positions
	What's the job like	start	foreman
	What are the members like?	join	supervisor
		buy	member
		member	job
		standard	offer
		competition	
		conditions	

Figure 3

Framework

UNIT 1: INSTRUCTIONS AND DIRECTIONS

Sample

Exponents

Functions	Syntax	Lexis	Sample Activities	Materials
Making polite requests	Could you tell me...? I wonder if you can	Vocabulary related to traffic	• Warming up	• Tapes
Asking for directions	help me.... The best way is to...	(traffic light, intersection, place	• T: presents structures and vocabulary	• Maps (large/small) • Pictures of machines
Giving directions	Imperatives	names, directions, actions...)	• Pairwork	• Cards
Asking for clarification	Questions		• Groupwork: Magic Birthday	• Some written instructions
Asking for and giving instructions			• Ss listen to tape and identify the places mentioned. • Ss practise with a large map, then with small maps and cards. • Taped dialogues for model • Reading aloud • Song: Put your little feet out	• Tape recorder, calculator...

UNIT 2: PEOPLE AND THINGS/DESCRIPTION

Functions	<u>Sample</u> Syntax	<u>Exponents</u> Lexis	Sample Activities	Materials
Asking for Describing (e.g. appearance, age, personality, interests...)	What is s/he (it) like? What do/does...look How + adjective...? What colour...? What use...?	Vocabulary related to shape, size, colour, characteristics	• Warming up	• Tapes
			• T: presents and explains new vocabulary	• Pictures of people/things • Pictures of machines
			• Ss practise	• Cards
			• Ss listen to tapes and identify people and things	• Objects

- T describes
someone as model
- Pairwork: Ss
describe a
person/thing
- Guessing games
(Group/class